

## “Alive in the Now”: Ekphrasis in Philip K. Dick and William Gibson

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**Abstract:** There is a long literary tradition of describing works of art within fiction, a rhetorical strategy known as ekphrasis. This essay considers its function in the work of two American science fiction authors who have made extensive and robust use of the trope: Philip K. Dick and William Gibson. Both deploy ekphrasis as part of their consideration of the relationship between art, craft, and techne, and as a way to interrogate what counts as authenticity and authorship in worlds where various forms of reproduction and replication abound. Dick’s use of art as a signifier of the human and a litmus test for spiritual truth in a degraded culture is elucidated through an examination of several short stories and two novels (*Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* and *The Man in the High Castle*). Gibson’s rather different use of art in the novel *Count Zero* is analyzed for its use of an art world taboo, forgery. Gibson centers an important plot arc around a set of art fakes, assemblages in the style of the 20th century American artist Joseph Cornell. The Cornell fakes and their surprising creator (whose identity is withheld for much of the novel) allow Gibson to examine the boundaries of what counts as art, how art is entangled with experience and physical being, and how art intersects with late capitalism. In both authors, ekphrasis provides a way to unsettle specific ideas on which their novels otherwise depend, notably cyborgism in Dick and ubiquitous virtuality in Gibson.

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As both a visual artist and a writer, I am acutely attuned to the ways in which art is described in fiction and poetry. The literary description of works of art is termed ekphrasis, from the Greek word *ekphrazein*, meaning to describe or point out. Ekphrasis has a very long history, with the description of Achilles’ shield in book 18 of Homer’s *Iliad* often given as the founding example in Euro-American literary history (Corn, 2008; Kaplan, 2009). Paintings in particular often receive this treatment; in poetry, among the better-known examples are W.H. Auden’s treatment of Pieter Bruegel the Elder’s work in “Musée des Beaux Arts” (1938), and Anne Sexton’s use of Vincent Van Gogh in “The Starry Night” (1961). In fiction, notable examples of ekphrasis include Charlotte Brontë’s invocation of a painting of Cleopatra in her novel *Villette* (1853), Oscar Wilde’s *Portrait of Dorian Gray* (1890), and a painting of the Marriage at Cana in Robertson Davies’ novel *What’s Bred in the Bone* (1985).

Science fiction likewise takes advantage of ekphrastic description; examples can be found in the work of writers as diverse as H.G. Wells, Margaret Atwood, and J.G. Ballard. A classic example is Roger Zelazny’s 1985 novella *24 Views of Mt. Fuji, by Hokusai* (2009), in which the eponymous series of prints by the Japanese artist Hokusai—and descriptions thereof—serve as a structuring device for the entire plot. The following typical description from this novella is a study in absences:

I study the print: A soft blueness to the dawn sky, Fuji to the left, seen through the teahouse window by two women; other bowed, drowsing figures like puppets on a shelf.... It is not this way here, now. They are gone, like the barrel-maker—the people, the teahouse, that dawn. Only the mountain and the print remain of the moment. But that is enough. (p. 363)

**Aiive in the Now**, continued

Zelazny's attempt to bring the artwork into the present moment of the novel reveals two absences: first of the physical artwork itself (leaving the reader with text in its place), and second of what is represented within the missing work—the people, the place, and the day, all of which are “gone.” Gary Shapiro (2007, p. 14) argues that is gaps of these kinds that actually enable ekphrasis.

A couple of more recent examples appear in Connie Willis's time-travel novels. In *To Say Nothing of the Dog* (1997), several characters are seeking a mysterious MacGuffin called the “bishop's bird stump,” which late in the novel is revealed to be a Victorian ceramic vase. In this case, the otherness of the ekphrastic object as both missing and detached from its original physicality (Mitchell, 1995) is amplified by the otherness of being outside of the correct space-time as a 19th century curiosity transported into the future. In *All Clear*, the second volume of her two-part novel *Blackout/All Clear* (2010), an allegorical painting of Christ, The Light of the World, by the British Pre-Raphaelite painter William Holman Hunt stands as a signifier of hope during the London Blitz.

Some scholars of ekphrasis focus on its role as a representation of a representation, as in the Zelazny excerpt given earlier. For example, James A. Heffernan (1993), terms ekphrasis “a verbal representation of a visual representation” (p. 3), framing it essentially as a matter of description. Acknowledging incommensurability between the visual and verbal realms of experience, Lawrence Venuti frames ekphrasis as a translation (Moxey, 2013, p. 95), while William Mitchell (1995, p. 163) terms it a double translation or encoding that moves from image to text and back to an image formed in the reader's mind. Barbara K. Fisher (2006) underlines ekphrasis as “an interpretive occasion” (p. 2), recognizing an explicit discursive function that extends beyond showing.

Other writers take an expansive view of ekphrasis that extends beyond the localized literary device.

Mitchell (1995) ends by arguing that ekphrasis, with its potential to encompass every possible kind of image including those (like Achilles' shield) that may never have existed at all, “aims to be all of literature in miniature” (p. 181). Jas Elsner (2010) argues persuasively that the entire field of art history is “nothing other than” ekphrasis writ large (p. 11). Following both, it could even be argued that the science fiction novel itself is something of an ekphrastic enterprise blown up from the scale of a painting to the scale of the world itself, with the novel being an extended description of the object that is the created world in all its facets. (This is technically true of all fictional worlds, but we ordinarily don't notice it because in general we have already accepted the world of the fiction as an analogue of our ‘real’ world, i.e., not a created thing in its own right based on various assumptions.) And if a science fiction novel amounts to a dispersed ekphrasis, then any localized moments of ekphrasis within the novel necessarily help to constitute this world, while simultaneously drawing attention to its speculative nature. In other words, ekphrasis is a handy rhetorical device that shines a meta-literary light on science fiction's particular mode of speculative description.

Mitchell further argues (1995, p. 156) that ekphrasis represents an attempt—ultimately futile—to subsume the visual within the linguistic dimensions of experience. The visual ends by challenging logocentrism through infiltration; its undigestible visuality poses an existential threat to language from within the text itself. In science fiction, moments of explicit ekphrasis challenge not just language but the world of the novel itself by shifting the author's general argument into a different register. Here I will examine works by two science fiction writers, Philip K. Dick and William Gibson, who make extensive use of ekphrasis to amplify their ideas about contemporary culture through the lens of the near-future. Both Dick and Gibson deploy ekphrastic imagery as a form of meta-argument against aspects of the dystopic worlds that they have themselves created. In particular, they use ekphrastic language to

**Alive in the Now**, continued

unsettle our understanding of creators and creations. Yet at the same time, ekphrasis functions conservatively within their oeuvres, reinforcing certain male-centric assumptions that underlie much science fiction and writing about art in the 20th century.

**Craft, Utility, and Artifacts**

Both Gibson and Dick frequently use terms that are drawn from art and imply forms of seeing that verge on ekphrasis. Traditional art-historical terms such as the picture window and the film act to distance the events described using these words and to position the narrator as an omniscient witness. For example, in a single passage in Dick's short story "The Golden Man" (1991a, p. 59), he deploys all of the following art-related terms in describing a vision: panorama, scene, still, and tableau. I am not going to focus on these kinds of near-ekphrastic usages here, but rather on those situations in which the authors concern themselves with the creation, preservation, or impact of traditional art objects and artifacts. In these cases, Dick typically focuses on artisanship, that is, on skills within a defined practice rather than on original creation. For example, he opens the short story "Foster You're Dead" (1991c), as follows:

He [Mike Foster] fumbled in his desk and brought out his intricate small-animal trap. "All finished, Mrs. Cummings. And my knife, it's done, too." He showed her the razor-edged blade of his knife, glittering metal he had shaped from a discarded gasoline drum. (p. 221)

Although this knife has its own originality, the emphasis here is on making practical tools for survival: an animal trap and a knife. These are primitive body prostheses created—in the case of the knife at least—through the recuperative process of bricolage. Here too we see one of Dick's recurring themes: the championing of creative people, especially men, who work with their hands, often within a specific craft tradition,

which White (2013, p. 112) argues for as a move on Dick's part to counter the immateriality and ahistoricity of his stories.

In two other short stories, Dick focuses on the idea of crafted objects as artifacts—that is, as remnant objects of lost cultures that embed and express knowledge and that required deep skill in their making. In these stories, he essentially accepts the distinction Immanuel Kant made in the *Critique of Judgement* (1790/1987) between craft objects and fine art objects. The meaning and value of the former arise from their practical utility, while the meaning and value of the latter arise from their expression of spiritual or intellectual concepts. Yet even while working from a narrow view of craft, Dick oversteps these boundaries in some interesting ways. In the short story "Pay for the Printer" (1991d), Dick gives us a situation in which loss of craft skills is catastrophic in its implications for the culture as a whole. In this story, extraterrestrial protoplasmic entities called Biltongs are able to 3D-print objects of all kinds and sizes, from wristwatches to entire gas stations. The Biltongs do not originate anything; rather, they make copies of originals or, in some cases, copies of good copies:

"What did he have to go on?" the man in back asked. "An original?"

"A print—but a good print. One he did thirty-five years ago—my mother's in fact." (p. 241)

For both speakers, the underlying value is simple utility, expressed as fidelity to a pattern and a use: a good object is one that is correctly formed to function as a chair or a wristwatch, not least so that its copies can also be correctly formed. Originality becomes deviance from the pattern and the use and is, within the terms of the story, literally life-threatening. The culture has entered a kind of stasis in which nothing new can develop and all the historical objects are preserved in "vacuum-sealed subsurface shelters" (p. 243). Dick is clear about how this situation has resulted

**Alive in the Now**, continued

in skill loss for the citizens, who say things like “Who knows anything about motors? That’s not our business” (p. 242) and “There isn’t anything we can do on our own” (p. 243).

The problem for the humans in this story is that the central Biltong is breaking down from illness and old age (as are many of the others). This Biltong cannot successfully reproduce himself anymore; and his copies are coming out deformed, as when he tries to replicate a Steuben crystal cup and it turns out as a “dull globe... a grotesque parody” (p. 248). Martin Heidegger (1962) spoke of a moment when a culture reaches the point of “conspicuousness” in its relation to tools, a moment when a tool that it has taken for granted breaks down and becomes newly visible to the culture’s consciousness. In Dick’s story, the Biltong-dependent culture is just reaching this point. Because the Biltong is also alive, it is a moment of agon in which the instrumental use of living beings surfaces through the sudden unavailability of what was taken to be a familiar tool. Consequently that tool—the Biltong—is triply estranged: from its use, from its essence as a tool, and from any being it might have apart from its use-value.

At this point, Dick introduces a cultural savior named Dawes, a man who has begun the process of relearning the most basic craft skills. He is teaching himself more or less from scratch, so original creation first reappears in its crudest form: as a hand-hewn wooden cup made with a hammered knife, along with some woven cloth. Reactions from people who see this for the first time express both astonishment and helplessness:

“You made it with what? I don’t see how? What did you make it out of?” (p. 249)

“You made this knife?.. Where do you start? You have to have tools to make this. It’s a paradox!... It isn’t possible!” (ibid)

“It’s no good—you couldn’t cut anything with that.” (ibid)

Losing the central Biltong has exposed a constellation of deficiencies among the humans: deskilling, the inability to imagine how to make anything, and, most radically, the inability to imagine how something might not have an obvious use—how something called a knife might be of value (as art) even if you could not cut anything with it. Near the end of the story, Dawes contrasts the imitative act of mechanical printing with the implicitly originary art of building, saying, “Printing means merely copying. I can’t explain to you what building is; you’ll have to try it for yourself to find out. Building and printing are two totally different things” (p. 252).

Here Dick accepts the view of copies as fundamentally degraded that was laid out by Walter Benjamin in his 1968 essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.” Benjamin argues that traditional artworks have an “aura” that arises from their historical uniqueness. Reproductions—endlessly the same as one another—cannot have this and so remain “merely” derivative of that which has true authenticity. In Dick’s story, the Benjaminian aura belongs to the originals stored in their sealed vaults, and it belongs to the crude objects that Dawes is constructing. Dick has carefully crafted a scenario in which printing is something done for humans rather than by humans and is thus not (yet) accessible to them as a *techne* in its own right that can produce unique objects through methods such as monoprinting that emphasize variation rather than similarity. But the traditional view of art that Dick is expressing runs deeper than method: in his use of the architectural verb “building” he is positioning even original (i.e. non-copied, non-printed) art as a servant of utility.

Elsewhere, Dick examines the relative values of an original and a reconstruction—rather than, as in “Pay the Printer,” a direct copy. In the story “Exhibit Piece” (1991b), the main character is a man named George Miller who works at a museum-like organization called the History Agency, Middle Twentieth Century division. Psychically immersed in the past, Miller wears preserved

**Alive in the Now**, continued

artifacts like suits with real buttons and carries a briefcase entertainingly described as “a squashed Jurassic lizard” (p. 155). As Miller says to one of his colleagues, “My first loyalty is to my art”: here referring to the creation of what are in effect large-scale dioramas. He goes on to explain:

[Art is] a twentieth-century term.... You're nothing but a minor bureaucrat in a vast machine. You're a function of an impersonal cultural totality. You have no standards of your own. In the twentieth century men had personal standards of workmanship. Artistic craft. Pride of accomplishment. These words mean nothing to you. You have no soul. (p. 156)

The key word in this passage is not art but “workmanship”: what Dick, by way of Miller, is describing is very much the pride of mastery and care that is accessible to any worker, regardless of whether the thing made is paintings or candles or dresses. This is further evident in one of the exhibits in the History Agency: a house completely furnished with original items, or in other words, a reconstruction built out of preserved items. It is a kind of patchwork, not itself a preserved original but a simulacrum assembled out of individually preserved period items: a stove here, a carpet there. It is a triumph of nostalgia, a kind of physicalized eidetic-memory object that required care, but no particular imagination, to construct.

Miller's boast of “artistic craft” and “soul” (p. 156) seems inflated in terms of the specific things he has had a hand in creating, suggesting that the force of these words must actually adhere elsewhere. They certainly make more sense in relation to the elevated commitment he brings to his performance as Mid 20th Century Man, a commitment so extreme that it appears to have the ability to warp space-time. The house exhibit turns out to function as portal—when Miller enters it one day, he finds himself in a version of the mid 20th century, living the life implied by the exhibit. Here ekphrasis literalizes an argument made by science fiction author Joanna Russ

(1971), that mainstream 20th century science fiction never imaginably escapes white middle-class suburbia.

Despite the fact that the History Agency house is not truly an original, Dick comes down strongly on the side of its historicity, essentially arguing that the (re)constructed house is auratic in the Benjaminian sense, as evidenced by Miller's devotion to it. Indeed, it is super-auratic in that the replica house can actually open a hole in space-time. Even more to the point, it is able to provide Miller with that most profound and irreproducible of all experiences: the experience of the real. Here the proleptic aura that surrounds science fiction is echoed in the text, as Miller's immersion in the 20th century makes it real even before he is literally transported back in time.

The History Agency house is an assemblage, in the sense defined by William Seitz (1961): something patched together from bits and pieces of other things. Yet it is a peculiar kind of assemblage, one created within severely restrictive guidelines as to its materiality. Where assemblages are typically made from disparate fragments that don't appear to belong together, the History Agency house is made up of whole objects that would likely have been found together in their own era. The emphasis is on a false continuity rather than a radical discontinuity. As with most assemblage, the emotional valence wavers between melancholy over the vanished culture from which the objects were saved and pleasure over the potential fusion of unwanted things into something new (Seitz, 1961; Dezeuze, 2008). This connection between assemblage and science fiction will return in my consideration of William Gibson's novel *Count Zero* later on.

What is lacking in all of these stories is any sustained consideration of art as semiosis, art as an intellectual or symbolic or expressive form. Art is shown to exist within a relatively narrow terrain, boxed in by considerations of immediate utility (Dawes' knife) on the one hand, and utilitarian preservation of applied arts on the other (so as to enable the making of such things as knives

**Alive in the Now**, continued

and houses). However, in two of his novels, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968) and *The Man in the High Castle* (1962), Dick goes much further in ekphrastically placing art and artifice into relation with the human.

**Art as Signifier of the Human**

In *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, art is treated preeminently as a signifier of the human. This distinguishes the ekphrastic move from its use in general literature, where the human dimension is taken for granted. In Auden's poem "Musée des Beaux Arts," for example, the issue is not whether Icarus is human when he falls from the sky, but that the world takes no account of his very human death. As in the stories discussed earlier, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* focuses on copies, though here the question of what is lost in the act of making copies shifts from skills to life itself. The lifelike electronic animals that populate the novel demonstrate this bluntly: lifelikeness has literally taken the place of (often extinct) life itself. Whenever Dick mentions the lifelike electronic animals, he uses phrases that underline their status as degraded imitations:

"the alleged sheep" (p. 6)

"the reclining ersatz animal" (p. 9)

"the sound of a false animal" (p. 64)

Alleged, ersatz, false: this litany of negative modifiers extends throughout the book, helping to set the book's overall tone of disgruntlement.

In *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, however, we find one of the few places where Dick grapples directly with a human relationship to art outside of practical concerns, and with the aesthetics of fine art. The key moment occurs while the bounty hunters Rick Deckard and Phil Resch are hunting the renegade Nexus-6 android singer, Luba Luft. They trail her to the old San Francisco Museum of Modern Art on Van Ness Avenue,

catching up with her in an exhibit of works by the Norwegian artist Edvard Munch. Resch and Deckard pause to look at Munch's famous painting *The Scream*:

The painting showed a hairless, oppressed creature with a head like an inverted pear, its hands clapped in horror to its ears, its mouth open in a vast, soundless scream. Twisted ripples of the creature's torment, echoes of its cry, flooded out into the air surrounding it; the man or woman, whichever it was, had become contained by its own howl. It had covered its ears against its own sound. The creature stood on a bridge and no one else was present; the creature screamed in isolation. Cut off by—or despite—its outcry. (p. 114)

With this description, Dick uses the Munch painting to evoke simultaneously those qualities that make the book's androids fearsome to humans—"hairless, oppressed creatures"—and their very human ability to suffer.

Meanwhile, Luba Luft is looking at a different work altogether, a Munch drawing called *Puberty*, in which she sees "a young girl, hands clasped together, seated on the edge of a bed, an expression of bewildered wonder and new, groping awe imprinted on the face" (p. 115). Luft asks Deckard to buy her a copy of the drawing, and he agrees, though the best he can do is to purchase a book of Munch's art that includes a reproduction of the drawing. Not long afterwards, Resch shoots Luba Luft in an elevator, and Dick fuses the Munch pieces—the screaming creature and the bewildered girl—in his description of this moment: "She began to scream; she lay crouched against the wall of the elevator, screaming. Like the picture, Rick thought to himself, and, with his own laser tube, killed her" (pp. 117-118).

In nearly every stage of this passage, art is explicitly positioned as indexical of the human: Luba Luft's appreciation for it, her attention to a drawing of a young girl (as a version of herself),

## Alive in the Now, continued

her desire to own the work, and Deckard's agreement to buy her a copy. Dick is suggesting not very subtly that the android Luft's responsiveness to art goes beyond an imitative longing to be human and makes her actually more human than the two bounty hunters.

At the same time, Dick is treating Luba Luft as he does many of his female characters: as an object of male desire and a plot device that enables the male protagonists. Luba Luft is explicitly connected with puberty, a moment when men understand girls as becoming sexually available, and very shortly afterwards she is violently killed by the two men in the elevator. This entire scene provides strong evidence for Mitchell's (1995) observations that "treatment of the ekphrastic image as a female other is commonplace" (1985, p. 168) and that such treatments have voyeuristic elements that frequently verge on the pornographic. The description of Luba Luft's death focuses on her helplessness before male power, while the comparison "like a picture" puts her explicitly in the male gaze, underlining her objecthood and removing any aspect of the human that might qualify her for compassion.

After Luba Luft dies, Deckard asks the sociopathic Resch, "Do you think androids have souls?" With this query, Dick returns the scene to philosophical abstraction, moving it safely away from the brutal actuality of what the two men just did to Luba Luft.

### Art and Spirit

In 1962, Dick published *The Man in the High Castle*, a novel set in a parallel history in which Germany and Japan won World War II and divided America between themselves. Here Dick considers art as a form of social currency while also continuing his consideration of the relationship between art, value, and the historicity of objects. Most of this unfolds through the activities of the antiques dealer, Robert Childan, and the craftsman-artist, Frank Frink.

Childan, who sells both real antiques and fakes, well understands the value of art as a form of currency, whether deployed through barter, gift, or bribe. He uses his expertise with antiques to 'buy' favor with both the important Japanese minister Nobusuke Tagomi and with the Kasouras, a young Japanese couple who are well connected and highly cultured. During a dinner at the Kasouras' house, Childan—who begins by referring to himself as a "white barbarian" (p. 102)—mentally derides the Kasouras' eclecticism, noting that "they pilfer customs right and left" (p. 107). The conclusion he reaches—"only the white races endowed with creativity" (p. 107)—allows him to reclaim cultural authority by recasting his barbarism as racial superiority.

When we first meet Frank Frink, he is making fake antique Colt revolvers for the Wyndam-Matson Corporation. After he is fired, his friend Ed McCarthy persuades him to start making original, contemporary, handmade jewelry. He shows some of these to Childan, who takes a few on consignment to sell as "small sculptures" (p. 140), wearable works of art. He gets one, a pin, into the hands of Paul Kasoura, whose friends laugh it off as a mere bit of amorphous melted metal, without apparent design, intention, or evident aesthetic qualities (p. 167).

Kasoura nonetheless comes to value Frink's jewelry, finding that it is "alive in the now" whereas historical artifacts and relics "merely remain"; it has a quality that is "in opposition to historicity" (p. 168). Paul Kasoura further observes (p. 169) that the pin made by Frink is so formless that it stands outside art, and so unique that there is no word that can properly categorize it. It is an authentically new thing in the world, and it comes to serve as a kind of test of character in the later parts of the book. When Nobusuke Tagomi sees the jewelry, Robert Childan tells him:

These are not the old.... These are the new. This is the new life of my country, sir. The beginning in the form of tiny imperishable seeds. Of beauty. (pp. 215-16)

**Alive in the Now**, continued

Tagomi is unable to see this but buys one anyway, as a matter of hope, sensing in Frink's work "the contracted germ of the future" (p. 216).

Here art is not functioning as religion, precisely, but is positioned next door to it, as the carrier of the culture's spirit. It is that which is most authentic, that which cannot itself be bought, sold, or traded away. It is no accident that Dick twice uses metaphors drawn from biology in this section—the tiny seeds and the contracted germ—since he is suggesting a quasi-life force in Frink's objects that places them between Benjamin's auratic objects and life itself. What is unique to Frink's jewelry is the way that spiritual value is directly linked to political resistance. The characters who value Frink's work—Kasoura, Childan, Tagomi, Frink himself—all have serious reservations about Nazified America. By accepting this incomprehensible jewelry made by a Jewish-American ex-forgery who is held in suspicion by the authorities—and by accepting it without even really understanding it—Kasoura, Tagomi, and Childan all gain a talisman through which they can begin to imagine speaking back to power. Through their ekphrastic struggles to properly describe Frink's jewelry to each other, they end by finding their own voices. And to the degree that Frink's formless object actually defies description, it casts into question the entire ekphrastic enterprise.

**Art and Forgery**

The examples of ekphrasis discussed above have centered on genuine artworks, historical artifacts, and authorized reproductions or replicas. There are many instances of deceptive appearances, ranging from the objects printed by the Biltong to the androids and replica animals of *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* It is worth noting that the unfulfillable promise implicit in ekphrasis—the promise to make present the missing artwork, to reproduce it fully in the text—echoes the unfulfillable promise of replicas and reproductions to stand in for their originals. Indeed, it could be argued that the mere invocation of an

object as a reproduction is an ekphrastic move, regardless of how fully described it is in the text.

In these texts, unauthorized reproduction, or forgery, only enters obliquely, by way of reference to Frank Frink's occupation as a forger of historical artifacts in *The Man in the High Castle*. For a consideration of how forgery and ekphrasis can work together discursively within science fiction, I turn now to *Count Zero* (1986), the second novel in William Gibson's *Sprawl* trilogy that begins with *Neuromancer* (1984) and ends with *Mona Lisa Overdrive* (1988). Here art and forgery form a major throughline that provides a key to Gibson's preoccupation with authenticity.

As *Count Zero* opens, a young woman named Marly Krushkhova has lost her job at a Paris art gallery because her ex-boyfriend used her as a stooge in a failed attempt to pass off a fake artwork. This fake was supposedly made by the mid 20th century American artist Joseph Cornell, who is known for his small boxed assemblages of found materials. It turns out that there are a number of these fake Cornell boxes, all products of the same mysterious and elusive box maker. One of these is described in detail:

The slender, fluted bone, surely formed for flight, surely from the wing of some large bird. Three archaic circuit boards, faced with mazes of gold. A smooth white sphere of baked clay. An age-blackened fragment of lace. A finger-length segment of what she assumed was bone from a human wrist, grayish white, inset smoothly with the silicon shaft of a small instrument that must once have ridden flush with the surface of the skin—but the thing's face was seared and blackened. (p. 15)

Like a genuine Cornell box, this one is filled with poignant remnants of life and culture sealed behind a pane of glass. Here Gibson combines a number of typical elements that recur in Cornell boxes—bones, part of a bird, a bit of fabric, a sphere, and an instrument—and juxtaposes them



**Alive in the Now**, continued

with elements like circuit boards that postdate Cornell's era. Whereas ekphrasis ordinarily revolves around individual works of art, what Gibson has done here is to create a pastiche, a condensation of Cornellness. This is pastiche in the classic sense of honoring a method through iteration (Hoesterey, 2001, p. 95) rather than in the post-Jameson sense of speech in a dead language (1985) or the post-Baudrillard (1994) sense of cynical simulacrum. There is a logic to honoring Cornell this way, given that Cornell's own method was also a form of pastiche, what one might term cultural pastiche or memory pastiche. Cornell memorialized his culture by gathering selected remnants into his vitrines, creating a distilled art that echoes back the ephemerality and sorrow of our lives (Solomon, 2015).

Gibson's phrase, "frozen on the boundaries of the human experience" (p. 15) well encapsulates the essential spirit of a Cornell box. In an interview, Gibson observed that this kind of making can arise from a sense of lacking: "You're going to make something, and you don't have anything in you to make it out of, particularly, so you start just grabbing little hunks of kipple and fitting them together" (Wershler-Henry, 1989). One can hear in this an echo of Philip K. Dick's desperate self-taught artisans Foster the knife-maker and Dawes the builder. And like all assemblages stretching back to the invention of the form by the Surrealists, the boxes made by Cornell (who was greatly influenced by the Surrealists) and Gibson's box maker are studies in detachment, juxtaposition, and gaps. As Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, Jr. (1995, p. 71) observes, a perfect fusion of their elements remains forever just out of reach.

Although forgers and fakes are a staple of fiction, Gibson takes his inventions a step further. Early in the book, Marly (as she is referred to throughout) meets Herr Virek, a fantastically wealthy recluse, who collects Cornell boxes and has turned up numerous fakes. On her way to meet him for the first time, she passes through an office in which hangs a piece of art, described thus:

The room was bare and white. On two walls hung framed sheets of what looked like rain-stained cardboard, stabbed through repeatedly with a variety of instruments. Katatonenkunst. Conservative. The sort of work one sold to committees sent round by the boards of Dutch commercial banks. (p. 12)

Here Gibson has done something rather rare in literature: he has made up an entire art movement, Katatonenkunst (Catatonics' Art)—albeit one that is readily recognizable because of its close kinship with existing art movements, especially the Vienna Actionism of the 1960s. Actionists like Günter Brus, Hermann Nitsch, and Rudolf Schwarzkogler undertook energetic performances in which materials ranging from paint to feces were flung, sprayed, and smeared on canvas or paper. The resulting art objects are essentially traces and documents of the preceding performance rather than precious art objects as traditionally understood (Schmatz and Daniel, 1992). Indeed, the Actionists explicitly rejected a commodity-based art practice, so it appears to be a deliberately ironic—or comical—choice for Gibson to position his similar Katatonenkunst as the ultimate commodity, something that a conservative bank would buy. Gibson's description of Katatonenkunst serves as an oblique critique of the art world itself, which can turn radical art to conservative ends, and which insists on collectible objects even when they are beside the point. Gibson is also aiming at his favorite target, global capitalism, which uses art as both a fungible commodity and a bare signifier of sophistication. Later in the novel, Gibson refers casually to the operation of a market exchange in art, where one can buy 'points' of an artist's work while the "originals were very likely crated away in some vault, where no one saw them at all" (p. 103). This reference to inaccessible originals offers a striking parallel with Philip K. Dick's story "Pay for the Printer," in which he mentions that the objects copied by the Biltongs were stored in subsurface shelters.

## Alive in the Now, continued

Gibson creates nonexistent art movements twice more in *Count Zero*, once referring to an “Autistics [autist’s] Theater” (p. 13) and elsewhere to a collection in Hamburg, Germany, that is “restricted to the work of psychotics” (p. 105). In all three cases, he has conjured up art movements that stem from forms of neurological disorder: catatonia, autism, psychosis. This choice underlines the degree to which art world transactions often have more to do with power than with aesthetics. Art by the mentally ill entered mainstream discourse by way of the early 20th century French artist Jean Dubuffet’s championing of art made by people without formal art training, which he termed art brut, or raw art. Although this work began to be increasingly collected by art-world insiders, the artists themselves have often been kept—or have chosen to remain—on the periphery of the established art world (hence the later synonym for this kind of work: outsider art). Crucially, their work often becomes valuable only after they die and thus have no further control over it. Gibson’s global capitalists acquire work by outsider artists without any deep connection to the culture being exploited, much as their Gilded Age forerunners did the work of indigenous peoples in the 19th century.

With his invocation of art brut, Gibson also establishes the earliest threads in a pattern that will lead towards an argument about the role of mind in art. As Michel Thévoz, a former curator of the Collection de l’Art Brut in Lausanne, Switzerland, observes: “Art Brut and cultural art are poles between which are situated...all sorts of more or less hybrid creations” (Peiry, 2001, p. 73). Gibson’s instances of art brut thus establish one pole for the novel, while Joseph Cornell holds down the other pole, of “cultural art.” Against these, Gibson positions the Cornell forgeries as hybrids that partake of both originality and fakery, and that borrow from the symbolic universes of both Joseph Cornell and art brut. It turns out that the box maker responsible for creating those so-very-human fake Cornell boxes is a hybrid artificial intelligence (AI), the ultimate untrained outsider artist.

## Art and Creators

This AI—referred to hereafter as the Boxmaker—opens the door for Gibson to attack the question of authenticity by way of who, or what, counts as an artist. The Boxmaker controls a former “construction remote” inside an enormous gravity-free dome located on an earth-orbital space station. Its dozens of tool-tipped arms constantly reach out for a constellation of materials floating around it in space: half a silver spoon here, an armless porcelain doll over there. From these bits of debris it makes new boxes in the style of Cornell. It is no accident that the Boxmaker’s art is so intensely physical: it is one of Gibson’s major rebukes to the irrealities—cyberspace, the matrix, simstim—on which so much of the novel cycle depends.

Late in the novel, Marly for the first time observes the AI in the act of making its fake Cornell boxes. As it works, the Boxmaker speaks to Marly about its Cornell boxes, calling them songs: “I have my song, and you have heard it. I sing with these things that float around me, fragments of the family that funded my birth” (p. 226). The Boxmaker follows up this image in which singing emerges from materiality with a second image in which song merges with dance: “My songs are of time and distance. The sadness is in you. Watch my arms. There is only the dance” (p. 227). That is, at the very moment when Gibson reveals the Boxmaker as a master forger, he underlines the physical dimension of the work that is being done by connecting visual art to both song and dance. As in the earlier descriptions of Cornell boxes and Boxmaker vitrines, we also encounter the uncanny power of ekphrasis to verbalize an object in several different ways simultaneously, some of which may be mutually exclusive (Elsner, 2010, p. 26). The AI’s varying ekphrastic descriptions serve to reinscribe the multiple lives encapsulated within its assemblage as multiple viewpoints into the assemblage.

Marly is the Boxmaker’s perfect audience, enchanted by art rather than by technology itself.

**Alive in the Now**, continued

She weeps as she watches the artificial box-maker at work, saying:

You are someone else's collage. Your maker is the artist.... Someone brought the machine here, welded it to the dome, and wired it to the trace of memory. And spilled, somehow, all the worn sad evidence of a family's humanity, and left it all to be stirred, to be sorted by a poet. To be sealed away in boxes. I know of no more extraordinary work than this. No more complex gesture. (p. 227)

Yet the Boxmaker is not exactly, or at least not fully, the artist. Gibson explicitly denies artistic agency to the Boxmaker, investing that agency instead in those who assembled and programmed it. In other words, Gibson is saying that the art lies in having created an art-making machine that is able to perfectly mimic the work of a human artist. In this there is a parallel with Philip K. Dick's *Biltong*, with the difference that the *Biltong's* craft is limited to making replicas while the Boxmaker can make new works of art, each original and unique.

As an art-making machine, the Boxmaker harkens back to the Swiss artist Jean Tinguely's remarkable "Meta-matics" from the 1950s. These were large kinetic iron sculptures in iron designed with systems of gears and levers to function as painting and drawing machines. When set running, the Meta-matics turned out individual, unique works of Abstract Expressionist art that varied according to the machine's settings, the type of mark-making instrument being used, and the kind of paper fed into the machine. The Meta-matics fully automate the production of artworks, and in this withdrawal or diversion of human intentionality, there is obvious kinship with both Marcel Duchamp's *Readymades* (Duchamp was a fan of Tinguely's machines) and the aleatory art of 1950s artists such as John Cage. With the Meta-matics, Tinguely directly challenges the longstanding aesthetic theory of art as emotive or spiritual expression, championed by Romantic artists and critics ranging from John Ruskin to

R.G. Collingwood (Nahm, 1955). This theory holds that machine-produced objects are a priori not real art because machines can have no emotional or spiritual life that would make their creations truly expressive. Following this line of thought, the enchanting Meta-matics themselves are the artworks, while the second-order works produced by the machines are merely art-like.

Gibson can be seen as posing a challenge similar to Tinguely's through the Boxmaker. In a traditional theory of art, the Boxmaker's work can be marked as illegitimate along two separate axes: as the productions of a machine, and as forgeries. The writer Lance Olson, for one, concludes that the Boxmaker boxes are fake art, just another product of a culture of mass (re) production (Csicsery-Ronay, Jr., 1995, p. 75). Here Gibson comes up against a fundamental problem raised by fakes and forgeries of all kinds, as well as by Duchamp's *Readymades* and Tinguely's *Meta-Matics*: that the absolutist position which frames certain fabricated objects as never-art requires a radical discounting of the audience experience. It places the details of creation over the conditions of reception. Gibson undercuts this argument in several different ways.

In the first place, he complicates the details of creation through the systemic complexity of the Boxmaker, which is both a construction robot and an AI. The phrase "Your maker is the artist" (p. 227)—especially as it appears in a cyberpunk novel—suggests that whoever programmed the AI (or its components) is the artist, from which it follows that the code and the associated physical construct that produce the boxes is the resulting artwork, with the Cornell fakes as second-order artworks. But throughout the *Sprawl* trilogy, Gibson has carefully left much latitude for accident and uncertainty in his explanations of what the Boxmaker is and how it came into being—though one thing we do know is that it resulted from a fusion between two different and partially autonomous AIs, *Neuromancer* and *Wintermute*. It may be that *Neuromancer-Wintermute* has emergent abilities not predictable from either 'parent' AI.

**Alive in the Now**, continued

There is some evidence, too, that the fused AI is capable of learning, implying that over time it has become something more than the code as originally written. Because of this, it is not possible to say exactly how it is that the Neuromancer-Wintermute hybrid can create perfect, unique Cornell-style boxes, any more than it is possible to say how Joseph Cornell's human brain could do so. Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, Jr. (1995) argues that in *Count Zero*, the artist AI cannot be understood merely as a subroutine of "a momentous techno-evolutionary work of art" (p. 65) in large part because of its newfound autonomy and evolving consciousness of self. There is an implication that the AI, in achieving consciousness, may have attained a degree of selfhood sufficient for it to count as an artist.

In the second place, Gibson valorizes Marly's response to the Boxmaker's productions by giving it sympathetic prominence in the novel's denouement. It is neither the AI nor the AI's code that makes Marly weep: it is the fake Cornell boxes. Is this a failure of Marly's human imagination—her inability to appreciate programming as art—or a celebration of it? I would argue that it is the latter. Marly is the one who 'sees' authenticity; as Gibson put it in an interview, she is "the only one who can receive the true map" (Wershler-Henry, 1989). But she is also a "technological naïf" (Csicsery-Ronay, Jr., 1995, p. 73), a fashionista, and a dupe. She understands the Boxmaker's art without really knowing how it was done—she only sees the end stages, after all—a problematic choice on Gibson's part in that it replicates a traditional dichotomy between knowledge (male sphere) and intuition (female sphere).

Csicsery-Ronay, Jr. (1995, pp. 70-76) argues that positioning Neuromancer-Wintermute as an artist is Gibson's way of finding a place for individuality, desire, and memory in the postmodern techno-dystopia created in the first novel of the cycle, *Neuromancer*. In *Neuromancer*, we find the postmodern erasure of self refracted through the Romantic sublime, such that ecstatic fusion with the machine becomes the apotheosis of human

desire. In *Count Zero*, fusion moves from being the end to becoming the means—specifically, the means for the fused AI to develop as an art maker. Gibson works this idea of hopeful fusion—human with AI, AI with AI—throughout the *Sprawl* trilogy, in counterpoint with the idea of constant reorganization of elements, constant rebuilding from bits and fragments. The Boxmaker itself is both an assemblage and a producer of assemblages, while at the same time it is positioned as an emergent individual and creator of unique art objects. The Boxmaker can thus also be understood as a shadow image of the author, whose imaginary near future seems less a coherent civilization than an assemblage of ill-assorted cultural remnants. In this regard, it is not surprising that Gibson explained his attraction to Cornell's work by pointing to the fetishism of junk (Smith, 2013, section 3).

It is slightly disappointing that what we are left with is a rather conventional view of art: there is a transfigured artist (the Boxmaker), there is an attentive audience (Marly), and there are self-contained, unique, auratic art objects. An enormous amount of the most influential art made since World War I has been created by artists—the Dadaists, the Surrealists, the Situationists, practitioners of Relational Art and BioArt, and many others—who have rejected or stunningly reworked the assumptions that lie behind these categories and descriptions. But in Gibson's *Sprawl* trilogy, most of this history might as well never have happened. Csicsery-Ronay, Jr. (1995) holds that Gibson's chief concern, with respect to art, is to inquire how humans "can represent the human condition in a world saturated by cybernetic technologies" (p. 63) that make prior aesthetic categories seem antiquated. I would argue that while those technologies have brought the nature of the artist into question in *Count Zero*, they have not actually undermined traditional aesthetics of the artwork. The Boxmaker troubles our understanding of 'artist' by being both a forger and an uncertain kind of being, but its productions sit well within the mid-20th century canon. To make such boxes in the

**Alive in the Now**, continued

Boxmaker's day is to plant oneself many decades back from whatever would be the aesthetic avant-garde in the near future of Gibson's novel. Here again the Cornell boxes do extra ekphrastic duty, their orientation to nostalgia subbing in for the larger problem of yearning for lost golden ages when real artists supposedly made real art. Ultimately, the Boxmaker and its boxes signal a reassuring stability in what counts as art and artistry.

In 1950, the computer scientist Alan Turing imagined a test that would probe whether a computer exhibited thinking indistinguishable from that of a human being. If a person asking questions of a person and a computer (under conditions that preserved the anonymity of each) could not tell which was which, the machine would be said to have passed the Turing test. Implicit in the Turing test is the proposition that computers and humans might in some respects become functionally the same even if they never become physically the same. One conclusion that could be drawn from the fact that the AI's own boxes can make Marly weep is that the Boxmaker has passed a kind of Turing test. Its behavior as an artist has fooled the humans right through the book—fooling them through emotion and aesthetic responsiveness rather than through language (which is at the center of most Turing tests). Of course, it has passed this test only inside a fiction, but it still points at a problem shared by both the field of forgery and the Turing test: the problem of passing. All the exposed fakes in the world tell us nothing about the fakes that are still passing as real; all the failed Turing tests in the world don't necessarily mean we will be able to mark when one has been passed. The Boxmaker may arrive in reality before we are aware of it.

**Conclusion**

In literature, ekphrasis is often used to ruminate on speaking and storytelling on a meta level by forcing an image to communicate in a different language (Kaplan, 2009), and by examining the respective semiotic powers of words and imag-

es and "their relation to truthful representation" (Bal, 2006, p. 124). In the science fiction of Philip K. Dick and William Gibson, ekphrasis also does more specific duty as a mode through which to reflect on *techne* in both its contemporary sense of technology and in the original Greek sense that commingles art, design, and craft. Part of the power of science fiction as a genre comes from its exploration of topics that produce high anxiety in moments of rapid cultural transition—topics such as the increasing mechanization of human society, the erosion of human uniqueness, the loss of individual agency, and the spread of cyborgs (Haraway, 1987). Dick and Gibson deploy ekphrasis on all of these fronts, with particular attention to suspect types of images—reproductions, replicas, forgeries, fakes—that actively perform threatening transitions between old and new, high and abject, acceptable and unacceptable cultural forms. The threats represented by these kinds of images is echoed in the threat that ekphrasis, as a bearer of *visuality*, offers to the primacy of text.

Yet there are other ways in which ekphrasis is being deployed as a reinforcer of norms in both authors' novels. Twentieth-century science fiction was a largely male-dominated genre (Russ, 1971; Mellencamp, 1995; Melzer, 2006) in which "boys moved through space [and] girls stayed in place" (Mellencamp, 1995, p. 1). And art history—Esner's ekphrastic discipline—has tended to put forward a masculinist view of male geniuses and women models that functions by counter-defining the feminine in negative terms (e.g. decorous people, decorative work; see Parker and Pollock, 2013). In Dick and Gibson, ekphrasis largely supports rather than challenges both of these patriarchal traditions: the artists and artisans are mainly men (Foster, Dawes, Frink, Munch, Cornell, the Biltong), while the audiences and subjects of art are mainly women (Luba, Marly, the girl in Puberty). It is no accident that Gibson's Boxmaker, though a brand-new artist, is an ungendered being. The near future has not liberated women to be artists but has skipped over them altogether, finding a new way to continue the exclusion of women

**Alive in the Now**, continued

from roles of primary artistic agency. Mitchell observes in his discussion of the shield of Achilles in Homer's epic that there the ekphrastic turn offers the reader a world outside the narrative, one that Achilles himself will never know (p. 180). What it offers is a version of Homer's own world. In Dick's and Gibson's ekphrases, too, we see aspects of their 20th century, sometimes more clearly than the various near futures their novels project. Ekphrasis, in other words, offers a backwards turn, a nostalgizing engine that powers Dick's handicrafts and Gibson's Cornell boxes alike.

Although art appears as a valuable collectible in both *Count Zero* (Katatonenkunst) and *The Man in the High Castle* (Childan's antiques), both books are haunted by the specter of art as something that turns into cultural kipple: the rubbish that pads out Childan's shop and that floats around Neuromancer-Wintermute. What stands apart are Frank Frink's strange jewelry and the Boxmaker's Cornell boxes, contemporary works that appeal only to those who have the aesthetic sensitivity to respond outside of cultural norms. In *The Man in the High Castle*, the sensitives are Frank Frink, Nobusuke Tagomi, and Paul Kasou-

ra; in *Count Zero* it is Marly Krushkhova. In Dick's novel, it is only original contemporary (if not necessarily avant-garde) art that can be deeply experienced, that can be "alive in the now" and speak past the deadened voice of antiques or the muffled voice of forgeries. In Gibson's novel, it is the Cornell fakes that move Marly, and that the AI itself experiences as a song and a dance made out of the remnants of human treasures. This is where the Boxmaker's boxes tie back to the Katatonenkunst and other imagined art forms from earlier in the book. By focusing on art made by an artificial intelligence and on art made by people with neurological challenges, Gibson is underlining both the universality of artmaking and its connection to highly individualized experiences on the part of both makers and audiences. In their different ways, Dick and Gibson argue that art objects can be commodified, but that neither the making nor the reception can be. Just as ekphrastic descriptions mark language's defiant overextension into visual terrain (and vice versa), art constantly defies attempts to pin it into a singular form, method, or function. It remains forever Frink's amorphous blob and the Boxmaker's complex gesture.

**Alive in the Now**, continued

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